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Is the Pen Mightier Than the Keyboard? Creative Writers' Preferences in Writing Implements

Jenae Grant

Abstract

Throughout history, writers have used various writing implements to record and share their thoughts. Although research has been done on writing implements that help in an academic setting (Goldberg, Russell & Cook 2003; "Writing Longhand" 2016), results vary, and no research has been done on what implements university students studying creative writing prefer. This study looked at students majoring in English at Utah State University and their preferred writing tools when writing creatively. The results indicate that a small majority prefers computers, but digital composition is closely followed by pen and paper. Their preference depends how quickly they are able to get their thoughts on screen or paper.

Introduction

Writing implements over time range from the Roman stylus to the ballpoint pen and beyond. During writing's 5,000 year history, tools for writing have evolved significantly. However, in recent years, more people have been turning towards computers, leaving pen and paper to be considered "old fashioned." On the other hand, many famous writers swear by their favorite pen as the best way to let the words flow and create art. Will the next generation of creative writers have loyalty to these items, as horror author Stephen King does when he called a fountain pen and legal pad the "best word processor"? What do current writers of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry prefer for their writing implements? This study will ask these questions of upper division students who are majoring in creative writing at Utah State University.

Review of Literature

A study by Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003) suggests that computers have positive effects on the quantity and quality of students' work and that the writing process is more collaborative, iterative, and social in computer classrooms as compared with paper-and-pencil environments. Although this may be true in the academic world, many famous writers continue to swear by the creative power of the pen and paper. Successful authors such as Stephen King, James Patterson, and J. K. Rowling all report that writing with pen and paper allows them to write more freely. Joyce Carol Oates, who only writes in longhand, said, "Writing is a consequence of thinking, planning, dreaming – this is the process that results in 'writing,' rather than the way in which writing is recorded." Elin Hilderbrand, who writes two novels per year in longhand on a yellow legal pad, said, "People think it takes a long time, and I suppose it does, but this is how my brain flows" (Writing Longhand, 2016). They may have a point.

Gwendolyn Bounds (2010), writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, summarizes several academic studies that suggest "putting ink to paper stimulates a part of the brain...associated with learning," and that children who wrote with a pen wrote more, faster, and in more complete sentences than those on computers. The area of the brain called the Reticular Activating System, or the RAS, which is associated with learning, lit up much more when

subjects were asked to write words like “spaceship” by hand versus only studying the word closely.

Writer Michael Bywater (2011) explains that despite technology, it’s hard to find a writer that doesn’t use a fountain pen to write. In “Everything Starts with the Pen,” which gives an idea about his preference in writing tools from the very title, Bywater waxes lyrical about the joy of a custom made “Conway Stewart ‘100’ model in red-ripple Ebonite with a plain, elegant, fine nib in 18-carat gold and a twist-fill mechanism,” a pen he bought in honor of his father who had recently died. His essay on the importance of writing with a pen is actually a review of a new “smartpen,” the Livescribe Echo, a pen that integrates technology for notetaking.

As Bywater clearly demonstrates, writers’ identities are defined in part by the tools they choose. The moleskin notebook is such an iconic, tactile experience for many writers that it also contributes to their identities (Alexis 2017). Alexis delves into the material culture of writing, a topic rarely taken up. *Material culture*, a term originating in anthropology, focuses on the objects and artifacts that people use. They have the potential to contribute to people’s identity, their social status, and even their state of mind. Analyzing material culture for writers has the potential to understand their practices, identities, and technologies.

Each of these examples shows that many studies have been done about the tactile experience in a classroom setting; however, there hasn’t been much, if any, research done within the academic field of creative writing. This research focuses on up-and-coming creative writers who are currently pursuing baccalaureate degrees.

Participants and Methods

For this project, we chose to target students who are majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing, focusing on upper-division students who are the most likely to have formed opinions about their writing implements. We also wanted to ensure that students working in multiple genres—poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction—were queried. A survey was administered to English students at Utah State University enrolled in ENGL 4440 (Advanced Creative Nonfiction Writing), ENGL 4420 (Advanced Fiction Writing), and ENGL 4430 (Advanced Poetry Writing). This included 46 students, and 20 responded, for a 43% response rate, which is considered credible. We then reached out to six students who won a creative writing award in 2020; however, most likely due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the suspension of face-to-face classes, we were not able to schedule an interview with them.

Results

Out of the twenty students surveyed, 50% answered that they care about what writing implement they use, as seen in Figure 1. When asked how much they care about the writing implement they use when writing creatively, everyone either cared or cared a lot (see Fig. 2). It is clear that writers consider their writing tools essential. Six people said they prefer using pen and paper, while nine preferred using a computer instead, everyone else choosing ‘other’ (see Fig. 3). Twelve students said that they write better/easier or much better/easier when using their preferred implement. Thirteen said they even cared about the color of ink when they use a pen, everyone preferring either black or blue ink, and always a dark shade of that color.

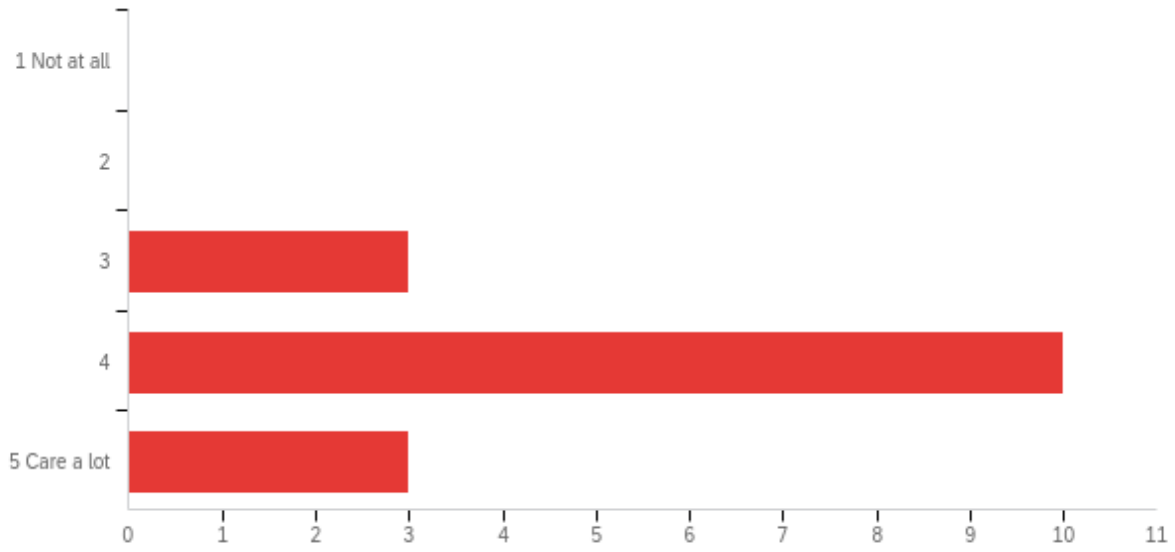


Figure 1 How much do you care about the writing tools that you use to write?

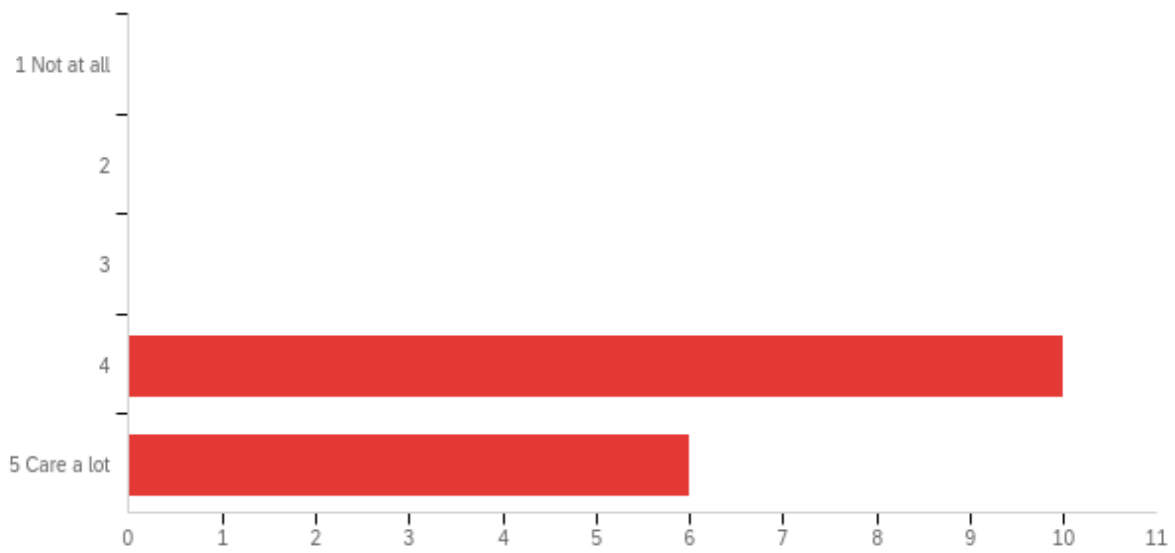


Figure 2 How much do you care about the writing implement you use to write creatively?

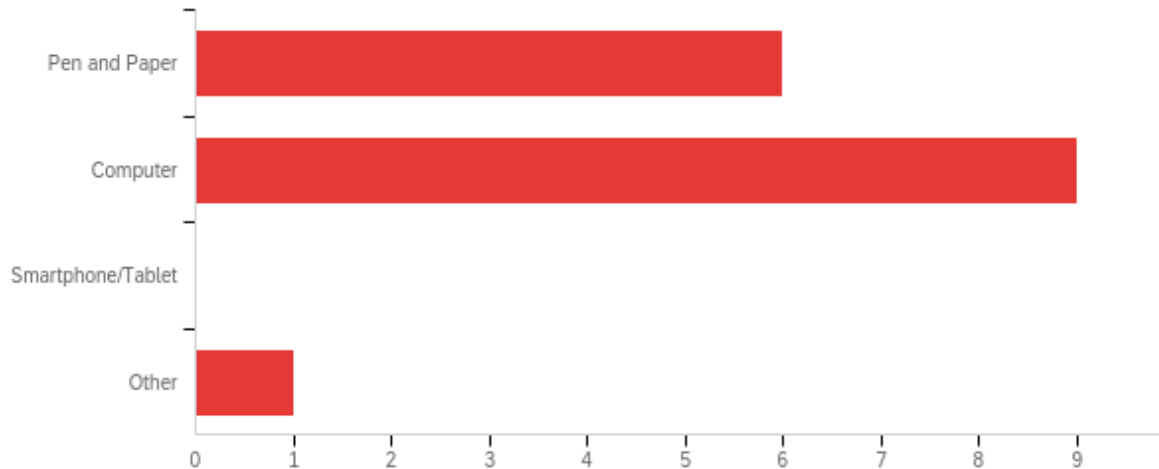


Figure 3 What is your preferred writing implement?

When asked why a certain implement is preferred, one student said, “When I write with pen and paper instead of on my computer, it’s definitely slower but has some important benefits. Typing up what I’ve written by hand is an edit in and of itself because I change things here and there as I go. That’s the most keen benefit to me: having a built-in revision in my writing process. I also like pen and paper because it’s more rudimentary and classic.” Another student mentioned, “I use Microsoft Word. I like being able to revise as I write, which doesn’t work well with pen and paper. It also feels more organized when I use a computer.”

When asked how their affinity with this writing implement began, one student answered, “Pencil looks so weak, and computer texts look so professional. I have always preferred writing with a strong black pen.” Another student explained, “Had to adapt to being at school all the time, so a computer is the easiest thing to write on currently. It is also quicker to jot down ideas on it.” One explained why they used a computer: “Writing is something that I struggle with, so having the opportunity to make instant changes to my document makes the stress/anxiety feel less to me.” Finally, one said, “I don’t exactly have loyalty to one writing implement over another; it just depends on the situation and how I feel. I think the only real proclivity I have is an aversion to typing on smartphones/tablets because it’s cumbersome and doesn’t allow for easy flow of thought.”

Some students felt loyalty to a very specific instrument. For example, one student said, “When writing by hand it must be a 07 pilot pen”. Another said, “When I’m writing with a pencil, I prefer .5 lead mechanical pencils. They write the best.” When asked how their affinity with these implements began, one student replied, “I prefer writing with pen over pencil because it’s more permanent and doesn’t smudge. Juicy, thick black pens are my favorite. Pilot G2 are the best!” Most students that preferred a computer said they simply used whatever computer they owned, not having too much preference; however, each mentioned a specific word processor, whether that be Word, Google Drive, or Pages.

Interviews were attempted with Utah State University students who won a creative writing prize in the past year. However, due to the restrictions implemented after the outbreak of COVID-19, these interviews were not able to be scheduled.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in this study, the first of which was a lack of background research available to inform this topic. The material culture of writing is just beginning to be studied, as demonstrated by Alexis. The lack of material culture writing made the references rather sparse and didn't allow for much data to form the ways in which the research was conducted. This research also only took place during one semester, making it difficult to conduct a wide expanse of surveys and interviews, which only took place in one campus setting. Because of the events of COVID-19, USU implemented restrictions in face-to-face meetings which caused many students to leave campus for the rest of the semester. This made interviews very difficult to conduct which is why they were not included in this research.

Conclusion

Although many writers in this study still prefer pen and paper, a slight majority weighs in favor of computers. These respondents preferred computers because it was easy to edit; additionally, it was faster for them to type than to write longhand. Those who preferred pen and paper felt it was more comfortable and allowed them to flesh out their ideas and get important details on the page. Some felt loyalty to particular instruments and named pens by label and brand. It was agreed that smartphones and tablets are not an effective implement to use when writing creatively and that when using a pen, darker, richer ink is always preferred. Overall, whatever helped the student be more creative and helped their ideas flow more freely influenced their preferences. For future research, we would pursue the interviews that were not feasible this semester. We might also recommend extending the study to other creative writing programs beyond Utah State University.

IRB Compliance Statement

This project is in compliance with USU's Policy 584: Protection of Human Participants in Research.

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Appendix

Survey Questions:

1. Writers opt for various “implements” when writing; by “implements” we mean pen, pencil, digital, etc. How much do you care about your writing implement on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being don’t care at all and 5 being care a lot?
2. How much do you care about your writing implement when writing creatively on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being don’t care at all and 5 being care a lot?
3. Do you prefer writing creatively with pen and paper, on your computer, a smartphone/tablet, or another method?
4. Do you feel you write better/easier when using your preferred implement? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being it makes no difference and 5 being it’s much easier/better.
5. Please specify the details of the implement you prefer. For example, if you use a computer, what brand do you use and what word processor do you like? Or, if it doesn’t matter, tell me why.
6. Do you care about the color of ink when you use a pen? If so, what color do you prefer?
7. Does the shade of this color matter? If so, what shade do you prefer?
8. How did your affinity with this writing implement begin? Why do you feel loyalty to it? Feel free to give as little or as much detail as you’d like.
9. Is there anything else you’d like to share?

Survey Answers:

1. 1:0 2:0 3:3 4:10 5:3
2. 1:0 2:0 3:0 4:10 5:6
3. Pen and paper: 6 Computer:9 Smartphone/Tablet:0 Other:1
4. 1:0 2:2 3:2 4:7 5:5
5. “I only like to write with a pen and paper. You would think a pencil would be easier because you can erase, but nope I only use a pen. I feel like typing on a computer or tablet kills my creativity.”
“When I write with pen and paper instead of on my computer, it’s definitely sloer but has some important benefits. Typing up what I’ve written by hand is an edit in and of itself because I change things here and there as I go. That’s the most keen benefit to me: having a built-in revision in my writing process. I also like pen and paper because it’s more rudimentary and classic.”
“I use a PC and the program Microsoft Word, mostly, or Google Docs when I am away from my personal computer at home.”
“Typing makes it much easier for me to edit as I write. Using a pen is limiting in my opinion.”
“When writing by hand it must be a 07 pilot pen. But most of the time I like to write on my computer. Brand doesn’t matter much but currently I have a HP envy. The word prosesser that I use is Microsoft word and I prefer that one because it’s a lot better and easier to use and has the capability to do more than any other processor that I know of.”
“I primarily use Google Docs, as it is free and saves across any internet-accessing technologies which I might care to use. Now, granted, pen and paper sometimes help

me be more creative, so I tend to outline my projects with pen and paper and then type them up on my laptop.”

“I prefer writing on a computer, usually in Pages (on a Mac), because typing is faster than handwriting. However, I sometimes prefer handwriting for certain things like developing poetry ideas.”

“If the pen I’m using when I write creatively does not write smooth, I can’t write well. I usually prefer using ballpoint pens and art/construction pens because they are designed to write smoothly.”

“I like using colorful pens and a nice notebook because it helps me have a nice place to save all my first drafts.”

“I struggle to produce creative work in a word processor unless I have first taken the time to write out all my ideas in pen.”

“I use Microsoft Word. I like being able to revise as I write, which doesn’t work well with pen and paper. It also feels more organized when I use a computer.”

“When I’m writing with a pencil, I prefer .5 lead mechanical pencils. They write the best. When I’m writing for a class, it’s generally on a computer. I use word on my HP laptop.”

“I use my Chromebook. All of my writing is kept in my Google Drive and I find it better to type because ideas come fast and I can keep up with them this way.”

“I use a mechanical drafting pencil for most of my writing. I like how thin the tip is because it lets me write without much friction and allows me to comfortably write. I use Microsoft word for most of my word processing; but this is mostly because it’s the only word processing program that I know how to use.”

6. Yes: 13 Black:9 Blue: 2 Blue or Black: 2

No: 3

7. Yes: 6 All some form of “a very dark shade”

No: 6

8. “Pencil marks looks so weak, and computer texts looks so professional. I have always preferred writing with a strong black pen.”

“I prefer writing with pen over pencil because it’s more permanent and doesn’t smudge. Juicy, thick black pens are my favorite. Pilot G2 are the best!”

“Had to adapt to being at school all the time, so a computer is the easiest thing to write on currently. It is also quicker to jot down ideas on it.”

“I used to suck at typing, but then I did a lot of it, and now I type very quickly.”

“In Jr. High I started using the pen and now I live them. The laptop doesn’t matter all that much just so long as it’s a laptop/computer.”

“I first began using Google Docs after one of my writing projects, which was saved on Word, went up in smoke while I was working on it my junior year of high school. Google Docs saves as you go, so my writing didn’t suffer from my absent-mindedness.”

“I don’t exactly have loyalty to one writing implement over another; it just depends on the situation and how I feel. I think the only real proclivity I have is an aversion to typing on smartphones/tablets because it’s cumbersome and doesn’t allow for easy flow of thought.”

“I first started writing during classes in junior high so a pen and paper was necessary if I wanted to avoid getting in trouble. Since then, I’ve found that writing with pen and

paper helps me think about my story more and get more important details on the page.”

“It started in middle school. I would always write my essays in a notebook before typing them up.

“Middle school.”

“Writing is something that I struggle with, so having the opportunity to make instant changes to my document makes the stress/anxiety feel less to me.”

“I just discovered that I hate pens because I can’t erase what I’ve written, and I write really small when I’m drafting creatively, so I prefer to smallest lead size possible.”

“I just used to write with everything I could get my hands on and came to find out that I prefer a black pen over everything else.”

“It mostly has to do with hand comfort and how efficiently I feel like I write with it.”

9. Yes: 2

- a. “I do enjoy writing on my computer as well as with pen and paper. I like seeing the words in print and being able to seamlessly edit them, unlike pen and paper. There are perks to both methods.”
- b. “I still really love writing on paper with pen, but because of circumstances, a computer is my main writing tool right now.”

No:13

Letter of Information

Is the Pen Mightier Than the Keyboard: Creative Writers' Preferences in Writing Utensils**Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Joyce Kinkead, a professor in the Department of English and a Grant, a student enrolled in ENGL 3470 at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is to understand what writing utensils upper division students who are emphasizing creative writing in their English major and are enrolled in advanced creative writing courses prefer when writing creatively. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

Your participation will involve taking a Qualtrics survey which will take no more than 10 minutes. You may also be asked to be interviewed about your answers to the survey which will also take no more than 15 minutes. We anticipate that 12 people will participate in this research study.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. The only foreseeable risk or discomfort is potential loss of confidentiality. In order to minimize this risk, the researchers will store all data in a secure folder in their computer.

Benefits

Although you will not directly benefit from this study, it has been designed to learn more about the material culture within English majors' creative processes, which can give us a greater understanding of the writing lives of English majors including material culture of an upcoming generation of writers.

Confidentiality

The researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize your particular story/situation/response.

We will collect your information through notes, interviews, and Qualtrics surveys. Online activities always carry a risk of a data breach, but we will use systems and processes that minimize breach opportunities. Data will be securely stored in an encrypted, cloud-based storage system which will be kept for three years after the study is completed, and then it will be destroyed.

It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. If the researchers learn that you are going to engage in self-harm or harm to others, state law requires that the researchers report this behavior to the authorities.

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by speaking with the researchers and requesting a withdrawal. If you choose